

Planning Matters

Welcome to the latest newsletter from South West Planning Aid.

Who are Planning Aid?

South West Planning Aid is part of a network of Planning Aid services across the country run by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and funded by the Dept. for Communities and Local Government.

Planning has an important impact on all our lives. It influences the places in which we live, study, work and play. It shapes the way our towns and rural areas develop and change. And it ensures any new housing, shops, workplaces, leisure facilities and open spaces fit the needs of the community. South West Planning Aid is there to help everyone engage with and influence planning decisions. In particular, we offer free, independent and professional advice and support on planning applications and development plan documents, to individuals and community groups who cannot afford professional fees.

Members of the public and community groups can call our helpline or email for independent advice on anything to do with planning. Their query will be dealt with by one of our professionally qualified Planning Advisors. For cases that require more time than can easily be dealt with over the phone or simply via email, we can draw on a network of volunteer planners. In addition we have an outreach programme of support for community groups and organisations who wish to influence planning decisions, and offer a range of seminars, workshops and training events – these are run by our Community Planners.

To get in touch with the South West Planning Aid team, please see the contact details on the back of this newsletter.

South West Planning Aid makes national finals

South West Planning Aid made it all the way to the finals of the Homes and Communities Academy Awards with Lockleaze Voice, its innovative community project based in Bristol. The Awards are the Government's national scheme for the sustainable communities sector and Lockleaze Voice made it to the last six out of fifty-eight entries in the 'empowering communities' category.



Community Planner Sue Webber and Regional Manager Barry Pearce at the Awards ceremony

SWPA set up Lockleaze Voice to introduce the Lockleaze community to the complex but important world of planning and to give those living and working in the area a chance to influence changes being pressed on the neighbourhood. Although the idea of a Neighbourhood Forum of this kind isn't particularly new, Lockleaze is not a well heeled community. Nor was there much previous record of community involvement in local affairs. It was a community that had become classically disempowered. Two years on and the group has had a big impact on local planning applications and now, understanding that planning decisions need to be plan-led, even has its own community plan, prepared in partnership with the City Council.

The awards ceremony itself was held on Thursday 4th June at the Roundhouse in London and although the award was won by another organisation, it was a fantastic achievement to make it to the finals given the level of competition. South West Planning Aid are extremely proud of the recognition that this initiative has attracted.

Casework Focus

Our Planning Advisors deal with a wide range of enquiries and the following example highlights just one of the ways Planning Aid can help:

A Charity operating a 'Safe' House for women previously subject to domestic violence in Somerset called our Helpline seeking advice on planning regulations for the use of the existing house and a proposed additional office building.

The caller was also worried about the possible disclosure of the Safe House's address through any publicity in the planning process. Planning Advisor Clive Smith clarified the planning rules and limits which apply to communal use of houses and explained the planning procedures and planning considerations which were likely to apply to the proposed building. Clive also explained the statutory publicity procedures relating to any application and suggested how best to frame the proposed use so as to meet the likely information requirements of the LPA without disclosing the exact detail of the use. The caller was advised, and given the confidence to, then meet with the Local Planning Authority to informally discuss her proposals.

If you require free, independent and professional advice and support but cannot afford professional fees, please call the helpline on 0870 850 9807.

Planning? Grrrrrr!!

Let's face it, planning applications are often bewildering things and you as a local resident or Parish Councillor have just 21 days to get to grips with it all - it's like an episode of Mission Impossible isn't it?

But help is at hand! One of our current 'Planning for Non-Planners' events includes a workshop to help you read complex drawings and understand what the various reports and documents actually mean. The event then moves on to consider how to respond to planning applications – by writing effective letters of representation. Sound advice is given on the issues the Council can consider (and those it can't) to help you maximise the impact of your letter.

One of these workshops was held in Ivybridge in late May, with an audience made up of Parish Councillors from all over the South Hams district, together with representatives from local community groups. The event was led by Community Planner Peter Whitehead with help from three of our volunteers, all professional planners.

Based on comments received after the event, and on feedback forms, the audience found the event very useful, considered it very interesting and said that they had learnt a great deal.

If you, your community group or Parish/Town Council are interested in attending these *FREE* training sessions, or you simply wish to find out more details, please contact the Community Planner covering your area. Full contact details are provided on the back page of this newsletter.



Volunteer Rob Pierce (centre) provides advice on reading complex plans

Vital Statistics Casework and Community Planning trends in 2008-9

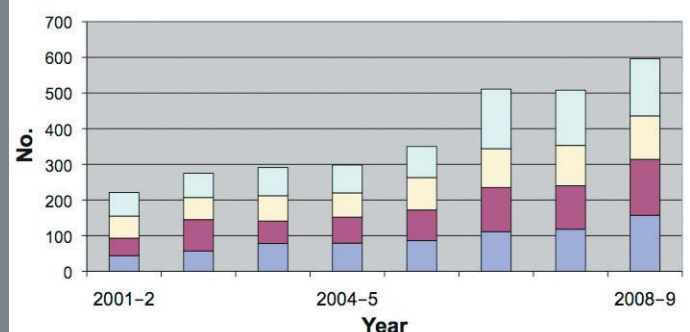
Each year seems to bring record enquiries to our Helpline and the latest statistics reveal this continuing trend. Despite the recession and general fall off in planning applications, during 2008-9 our Planning Advisors handled some six hundred cases; with each successive quarter setting new records (see the graph). Over a quarter of the cases we had from enquirers eligible for full Planning Aid assistance were dealt with by our volunteers.

The Government also sets Planning Aid targets for our community planning *outreach* programme and here too we've been performing pretty well. Here's how we did in 2008-9:

| No. of events delivered | Target | Achieved |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------|
| Community planning | 55 | 70 |
| Training and education | 17 | 17 |
| Partnership working | 15 | 36 |
| No. of volunteers recruited | 11 | 39 |

This increasing workload of course puts pressure on our volunteers and so we continue to need more people to help with our work, especially those who are Corporate members of the Royal Town Planning Institute. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer to support our growing service, please contact the Regional Administrator – details are on the back of this newsletter.

SWPA Caseload



Kids take on planning

Planning Aid provided some expert help in March 2009 when the Emmanuel Middle School near Wimborne in Dorset held a series of simulated Public Inquiries focussing on the expansion of Bournemouth International Airport.

Organised annually by the East Dorset Heritage Trust and using the Council Chamber at East Dorset District Council's offices, the roles of Inspectors, local planners, resident groups, shopkeepers and airport officials were all taken by school children. Each day a different class took up these roles so that after the week was over the whole school year had experienced the reality of Public Inquiry.

Helping out with some of the trickier answers and generally providing support were Bob Dean, SWPA Community and Planning Advisor based in Bournemouth and Planning Aid volunteer Raeph Cumming from Christchurch Borough Council. Both agreed that the youngsters were incredibly capable of putting their points across and that this was a rewarding exercise for all parties.

Refugees speak up

In March 2009, Community Planner Sue Webber worked with a group of refugee women who had positive views about their local environment and community but didn't know how or where to channel them. This lively family based group of women, many with small children and new to Britain, meets regularly in Easton in Bristol. Most of the women face big barriers when settling into life in this country, the biggest often being communication difficulties as they have little English. Sue used maps and information cards to explain the planning system, and her comments were translated into Arabic, Somali and Burmese.



Although new to the country, they have ideas and views gathered from their previous homes - some have lived in other countries in Europe before coming to Bristol. They had strong views on questions such as 'What could be done to improve the area you live in?' and commented that more buses are needed and that parks required a park keeper or play supervisor.

Making the planning system accessible to all is very important and a big aspect of Planning Aid's work. Sue found the group to be lively and interesting and hopes to work with them again in the future.

South West Planning Aid heads North

Staff and volunteers from Planning Aid's 10 regions, as well as Planning Aid Scotland, Planning Aid Wales and other colleagues, recently came together in the beautiful city of Edinburgh for the annual National Planning Aid Conference. Expertly organised and hosted by Planning Aid Scotland and chaired by Professor Greg Lloyd, the conference took place over two days in April at the Pollock Halls of Residence and featured a range of lively speakers, diverse presentations and interesting workshops all based around the theme 'Building Sustainable Communities'.

Here SWPA volunteer Rob Pierce, a Planning Officer at Torbay Council, writes about his experience at the conference and the impact it had on him:

"As a volunteer my invitation to attend the Conference was a wonderful opportunity to meet the full time staff and to fully appreciate just how committed our respective Governments are in their support towards Planning Aid. Professor Greg Lloyd chaired two days of thoroughly interesting sessions and introduced speakers of the highest calibre who explored some of the new themes confronting us. It has become clear that Mediation is going to have an increasingly important role to play in resolving and preventing conflict. This is perhaps an area where there is going to be a need for planners to develop new skills in facilitating the process. I was also particularly interested to hear about Scotland's "Planning to Act" and to appreciate the great work that this

enthusiastic group of people has done in engaging the Community in their interactive Art and Drama workshops. On a lighter note I am now a Rebus convert!"

The whole team is already looking forward to next year's event to be held in Cardiff and seeing how it will match Edinburgh in terms of style and content! They have a hard act to follow...



Planning Aid staff and volunteers Sue Webber, Sarah Martin, Bob Dean, Tim Dodds, Rob Pierce, Julie Allington, Peter Whitehead, Jessica Legg and Barry Pearce, overshadowed by Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh

Volunteer spotlight on... David Cliff

David Cliff works for planning consultancy Savills and has volunteered on several cases since joining South West Planning Aid in June 2008. In the following article, David shares his thoughts on what being a volunteer means to him:

“One of the most beneficial aspects of being a Planning Aid volunteer is the opportunity to work with a diverse range of people and groups. For the private sector planners amongst us, being a volunteer makes a refreshing change to our day jobs where we are usually advising more commercially focused organisations and interests. What’s more, seeing your advice make a real difference to people and communities is a great feeling.

There are also benefits to your personal and professional development. Being a volunteer undoubtedly increases your general planning knowledge and skills and is a great thing to add to your CV. It is also a really useful way of improving your communication skills particularly in explaining the complexities of the planning system and understanding the needs of the people you are advising. Crucially, it’s also a great way of learning to avoid the planning jargon that seems to come with our day jobs!

As for the disadvantages, well, there are not many but there are a few things to bear in mind. Obviously, being a volunteer uses up some of your precious time and there can be time pressures that need to be met. And, whilst you may have a number of cases to deal with along with your day job, for the person you’re advising it can be the single most important thing in their life at that moment. In effect though, you can volunteer for as much or as little time as you want and vary the time you give to fit in your day job.

There’s no doubt that the pros of being a Planning Aid volunteer clearly outweigh the cons. It’s a fantastic and rewarding way of applying your planning skills in a different way to your day job and in the process making a real difference to the lives of those people you’re helping”.

If you'd like to follow in David's footsteps and become a volunteer, please contact the Regional Administrator using the details given on this page.

The South West Planning Aid Team

The South West Planning Aid Team comprises:

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And a network of around a hundred volunteers, most of whom are fully professionally qualified.

Hopefully you've enjoyed reading about what we've been up to. If you have any feedback or material, please do not hesitate to contact our Regional Administrator, Jessica Legg (swadmin@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk) – all thoughts are welcome!

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